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ABSTRACT

This presentation is designed to provide a framework and reference points for death education for any setting or learning group. It sets forth a brief rationale for teaching about death, then lists three goals of death education: (1) acquiring knowledge and information; (2) clarifying personal values and goals; and (3) developing coping or helping abilities. The author describes his own course on death, including a week-by-week summary of class activities and assignments he uses to reach the three goals. He mentions the need to share information in order to improve death education and develop more refined approaches to teaching and learning. (Author/BP)

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DEATH EDUCATION: TEACHING A COURSE ON DEATH AND DYING

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Death education has only recently become a significant area of inquiry in medical schools, hospitals, and colleges and universities. The subject of man's mortality is today receiving more concerted focus than ever before. At all levels, teaching about the process of dying and bereavement and the facts of death and grief have proliferated. However, too frequently, little more than the press of demand and vogue have prompted the sometimes hasty offering of a course on death and dying. These efforts, while genuine in their intent, often suffer from a lack of a thorough consideration of several key elements in this topic of instruction. In addition, there are numerous prospective death educators who are in the incipient stages of organizing a course dealing with human mortality and its implications. What is needed is a sharing of information, methods, and goals so as to provide for improved education and the development of more refined approaches to such teaching and learning. This presentation is designed to provide framework and reference points for death education for any setting or learning group.

Initially, then, our concern should be a focus on the rationale for teaching about death. Secondarily, goals or instructional objectives should be considered. The rationale for death education is very simple. Death is the end of life as we know it. We all shall die. By knowing what we can about death we can approach the death (and life) of ourselves and others more meaningfully.

The goals of death education are three; acquiring of knowledge and information, clarification of personal values and goals, and development of coping or helping abilities. As with any content area there is much to be learned about death. Thanatological information consists of biological considerations, attitude and cultural approaches, research and anecdotal evidence, as well as literature and custom, and so on. This informational goal is probably what most attracts students to courses on death and dying. However, the objectives of clarification of values and goals become very important when the student begins to realize that he, too, will sometime die. He may die forty years from today or he may die tomorrow. But inescapably, he will die. This brings a focus more clearly on introspection and on life and what it means to him. Herein lies the real payoff to death education to the broad range of students. And yet they never anticipate or expect it. Thirdly, an important goal of death education is the development of coping or helping skills. To learn of death and to empathize with the dying provides a framework

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for coping with death and helping others through loss. However, this third objective is not an automatic end result of a course on death and dying. Unless one has had experience with death or been within the life space of death one has no advantage over the thanatologically ignorant. This last point will be emphasized again later.

Now, how should we set upon the task of teaching a course on death and dying? Keeping in mind our goals of information, values, and coping skills, this is how I cover a semester on the graduate or undergraduate level.

A number of excellent texts such as those by Feifel Kastenbaum and Schneidman are available. However, I use a mimeographed collection I call An Anthology on Death and Dying, consisting of articles interspersed with excerpts from literature and short stories.

I require a term paper or a project on some aspect of death and dying.

I require that each student visit "socially" with a terminally or chronically ill person (or family member) weekly during the semester. A log is kept and turned in at the end of the course. I feel that being personally aware of the life circumstances of the dying is the most important part of the students' course experience.

The first week I have the student complete a position paper, encouraging them to place on paper their thoughts and attitudes about life and death. I lecture about death in contemporary society, our cultural and emotional blocks, and show part I of the film, "What Man Shall Live and Not See Death." We don't discuss much this first week but mostly present information.

The second week starts out with definitions of death and the interrelatedness of different definitions and levels of death. We also list on the black board synonyms for death and discuss these (i.e. kicked the bucket, passed on, etc.). I then pass out paper and ask the students to "draw death." These drawings are then discussed by the students in groups of six or eight. This is the first class time devoted to class discussion in small group settings. We then see part II of "What Man Shall Live and Not See Death" and discuss the film. Copies of the Living Will as mentioned in the film are passed out and discussed. By this time the students have read Koestenbaum's "The Vitality of Death" and Tolstoy's "The Death of Ivan Ilych." I discuss them briefly but save the major part of them for week three.

Week three is the time for group discussions. The third week starts out with small group discussions of the Koestenbaum and Tolstoy readings. A lot of other issues and concepts are usually brought to the surface by the groups at this time. I next lecture about children and death and we pull out of the total class, experiences from childhood or with their own children. A lecture/discussion session on funerals is then followed by the film "The Parting" which concerns a Czechoslovakian village funeral. The film is debriefed and commonalities considered.

Week four starts out with the film "Until I Die". Among other things this film features an interview with a terminal patient. After the film, the dialogue of the interview is repeated and discussed to show how one gradually approaches a sensitive issue such as death.

Next various counseling programs or approaches are presented. Following this a death certificate is handed out with instructions to "Fill this out as you imagine it will be someday filled out for you." I then lecture on the purposes and uses of death certificates emphasizing the concept that accidents and homicides are not all outer caused but that through our own risk taking and carelessness we may have some degree of involvement in our own death.

Finally, at the end of the session we list on the black board the various explanations or expectations for what happens after death, such as heaven and hell, reincarnation, and nothing. The class breaks into groups based on these alternative explanations and prepare a group informative presentation on their particular alternative for the next class week.

Week five consists of each group in turn presenting to the class information about their particular alternative. The presentations are informative and seek to utilize whatever evidence or support possible, but the issues are not allowed to become emotional debates.

The sixth week we visit a hospital and meet with a chaplain. We then visit a cemetery and gather various kinds of information for later discussion. We also spend time discussing in small groups the patient/family visitations, and end with a lecture on learned helplessness and death.

Week seven starts out with a lecture and discussion of the experience people have described after near fatal falls, drownings, etc. We then move on to the information Moody and others have reported about life after death. With both topics personal experiences are shared. The seventh week ends with a mid-term exam. As the exams are handed in I hand out a folded and stapled sheet of paper with instructions "to open when you have ten or fifteen minutes of quiet and privacy, and do what it says." Typed on the sheet is the statement: "Driving home from class today you were struck by a car and killed. You are in an indefinite state of awareness but know that you are dead. What regrets and what reliefs has death brought to you personally?"

The eighth week begins with a small group sharing of "reliefs and regrets." This usually is a particularly heavy session. Next a visit is made to a local funeral home followed by a question and answer session with the funeral director.

The film "Just a Little Time" is shown and the session ends with a "six months to live" assignment. Students are asked to write how they would spend the next six months if they knew it would be their last six months. Stipulations are made that they would be free from pain or normal monetary concerns.

Week nine starts, with groups discussing their six months plans. We then rediscuss Koestenbaum's "Vitality of Death". Students find it now has new information and insight for them. A guest speaker, an Episcopal priest, discussing the role of the clergy with death and dying, completes the week.

From here on out the course's direction is somewhat dictated by where the class is at by now. The tenth week may start out with some guided fantasy, simulating death and our loved ones' reaction to the loss. We work together as groups to get as much empathy and realism out of death and life during this week. An assignment is made to write out a ten year plan - that is what the student plans to do and accomplish during the next ten years. They are instructed that these ten year plans are to be handed in on the last day of class and will be returned to them by mail in one year.

The next week serves as sort of a retreat from the deep introspection by focusing on euthanasia. The film "The Right to Die" is shown and discussion follows. An American Heart Association Volunteer then describes and demonstrates cardio-pulmonary rescitation with certification available with further student involvement.

Generally time is also allotted for brief student presentations of their term papers or projects. Class discussion of the impact of taking the death and dying class follows.

Final exam day involves collecting the visitation logs, handing in the "10 years to live" assignment and filling out a position paper relating to whether their attitudes toward death have changed since early in the semester or remained the same. Class evaluations are completed and the final exam is taken.

This then describes a method that has evolved over successive semesters to meet the instructional goals of information, values, and coping skills mentioned earlier. In addition to what has been mentioned, however, some general comments seem appropriate. For example, about midway through the course the student's focus becomes less on death "out there" as something that only happens to other people. Instead a great deal of soul searching often goes on concerning an individual's present life existence and relationships. One must be prepared to spend time with some students on an individual basis while they grapple with their personal priorities. However, seeing a student become more insightful about his own life and come to grips with what he really wants out of life is a rewarding experience.

The visitation part of the class strikingly brings out the fragile, temporary state that life is, as well as placing the student in a personal relationship with one approaching the loss that death brings. Many students, although understandably reluctant to enter into such a contact, later feel it to be the most important component of the course.

I might mention that enthusiasm for this class is higher than for any other topic I've ever taught. This is probably partly due to the personal investment required as well as the small group discussion and sharing sessions. Students do make changes in their lives and in their priorities and I will soon have some follow-up data to assess what long term effects exist. Probably the most notable changes relate to reassessments of personal relationships. A possible application here is in the area of marital counseling. For example, it would be interesting to see how couples whose marriage has lost some of its enthusiasm might be affected by the death education experience. I do know of individual situations where the course has had the effect of restrengthening relationships in such situations.

Another important area of course impact is on the development of coping behaviors. Students report having been able to operate more stably in personal situations involving the death of someone close to them after having had the course visitation experience. Their more stable response in a support role here is very important as well. Cognitive awareness of subject matter is not always internalized without practical exposure to the real world. The practical component then is an important one to consider in organizing a course on death and dying.